



栗城 惇

てのなる
ほうへ

illustration
小椋 ムク

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Night of the Faceless Chirping Plovers

Kusamakura wasn't sure if had those things called *parents*. He gave himself the name Kusamakura. Long ago, he opened a book he had stolen and used the first word he laid eyes on as his name. Kusamakura didn't even know how he understood words, how he could read, or why he had a general knowledge of the world even though no one had ever taught him. He didn't have parents or any siblings, but he had a general idea of what *family* was. He had never asked anyone else, but the others were probably the same. Kusamakura understood that they were just *those* sort of beings. He assumed he just naturally existed here, the same way the sky, water and wind all existed in this world. He had never actually confirmed that. He had no *way* to confirm it.

The beings that lived around Kusamakura kept their distance from him. Split tail ghost cats, foxes, foul smelling large ogres, things with eyes all over their body, eyes and ears that existed on their own floating around on the ground or on stones, all of those creatures lived around Kusamakura, but they kept their distance. A long time ago he felt lonely because of that, but he was already used to it by now. Whenever he wanted to be included with the others, he would be pushed away. They would tell him: *we never know what you're thinking, it's creepy, don't come near us*. What was he *thinking*? Only that he was lonely.

He had never thought of harming anyone even once. Still, they were all wary of him.

Kusamakura spent most of his nights alone, but one observation became clear to him from the human books he acquired. Perhaps his appearance that was similar to a human, was ‘unusual’ to their own ‘unusual’ forms. Therefore the reason he was unable to enter into the social circles of the beings that could transform into more frightening forms than himself, must have been because he was something closer to a human. The same way humans were afraid of them, they avoided Kusamakura *because* he looked human. Kusamakura’s theory became fact when the only being that would exchange words with him was a *rokurokubi* named Shunshou. He was the only one who would talk to Kusamakura without fear. Normally, Shunshou was also no different from a human. Other than his neck that could stretch endlessly, which he only knew from books, he didn’t look any different from a human. In other words, since Kusamakura and he weren’t that different in appearance, Shunshou knew Kusamakura wasn’t someone he had to avoid.

Even though his feelings of loneliness had faded long ago, he still felt as though he wanted someone to talk with more, or try living together with someone. He was alone as usual, but the feeling of wanting to be with someone slowly, gradually, but certainly, accumulated in Kusamakura’s heart.

One day when Kusamakura was tying up an animal that was to be his meal later as usual, he spotted a lone light that was like a firefly.

—*What is that?*

It fluttered low to the ground. When he strained his eyes, he realized it wasn't a living creature. It was something he had read about in a book before called a "lantern". In other words, there was a man there holding it. There had never been a human presence in the area Kusamakura lived since long ago, but lately they could be seen around there even at night. An inn seemed to have been built nearby. Since he slept during the day, Kusamakura didn't really know, but he assumed there were actually more of them than he thought. There were many animals that slept during the night, so he figured humans mostly did the same. With the tied up animal still clutched in his hand, Kusamakura curiously approached the lamp from a distance. He heard the crunching sound of pebbles being stepped on. He wondered where the man was going as he hummed cheerfully.

—Hm. He's not that different from me.

He had only seen a human man in books. His hair was tied up in a top knot, and was wearing the clothes of a merchant. His two arms and two legs weren't covered in fur, and he walked up right. If he were to point out any differences between that man and himself, it was probably only things like hairstyle and that he lived outside. Kusamakura was convinced when he saw that figure. He was much closer to this "human" than the creatures around him.

—Aah, I knew it.

That's why they keep their distance, Kusamakura nodded, finally understanding. This was why everyone would run away when they saw him.

Since he's a human who doesn't look all that different from me, perhaps if I lied about my background, maybe I could make a friend— Kusamakura thought as he took a step. He gulped, and with a feigned calm, came forward to call out to the man.

“Hello—“

The man stopped in his tracks at Kusamakura's voice. He looked around restlessly as if he were looking for the voice that called out to him.

“Hello.”

His heart was racing in his chest. Kusamakura popped his head out from the ticket and faced the man. The lantern's light illuminated a young man. Thin, slit-like eyes rested underneath his distinct eyebrows. His eyes that looked like they would close at any moment suddenly opened wide.

“Hee.....gyaaaaaah!”

The man threw his lantern aside and ran as fast as he could. With no time to run after him, Kusamakura, who had suddenly been screamed at, stood completely still.

“What.....?”

What just happened?

He wondered if the man saw someone else behind him and got startled, but when he turned around there was no one other than himself there. Confused, Kusamakura picked up the lantern the man had thrown to the side.

“.....it looks like a spirit flame.”

The candle standing inside was still burning. He wondered how humans lit them. Kusamakura could conjure fire, but humans seemed unable to do it the same way as him. It was written in books that they used “flints” and “strickers” then switched to “live coals”. Kusamakura didn’t know exactly how they did it though. Even if he were to ask, the man’s back had already disappeared into the darkness and could no longer be seen. Kusamakura had a profound interest in the lamp and the candle burning bright inside that he was seeing for the first time. Thinking it was a waste to just leave it there, he took it with him, but after a few hours the flame went out on its own.

Since the candle had burned out, Kusamakura walked around the next day with a spirit flame inserted inside of the lantern. He figured he would return it to the person who dropped it, but even though he continued to loiter around the same place day after day, he had yet to see any humans in that area since then.

So Kusamakura spent his abundance of time alone, thinking to himself as usual. In no time his one uncertainty came to mind. That human really did seem to be terrified when he saw Kusamakura. He didn't want to admit it, but there was no mistake. Maybe it was because he suddenly showed his face from inside the thicket when no one else was around—but he wasn't optimistic enough to think that way, he could see the reality of the situation.

—In other words, no matter who looked at him, neither beings saw him as one of their own, even though he couldn't see how they were different.

I don't really care if that's the case, he tried to tell himself as he wrapped his arms around his knees. At that moment, a young female ghost cat went by in front of him. Kusamakura watched her, she was a cat wearing a decorative kimono that looked as heavy as shackles. She plucked a shamisen with her claws, singing a song as the hem of her kimono dragged across the ground. The unfamiliar smell of her white make up, and alcohol riding on the night wind pierced his nostrils. She must have gone to the town to haunt some humans. She seemed to be in a rather good mood.

Something fell from her kimono sleeve. It made a faint metallic sound, but the cat didn't notice. She was returning to her home with a cheerful gait as she played her shamisen without a care in the world. He thought about ignoring it, but since he had seen it fall, he reluctantly picked it up and called out to her.

“Hey, you dropped this.”

“Huuuh.....what, oh, it’s you.”

Being slightly tipsy, her face was smiling softly, but when she saw Kusamakura she frowned. The cat shook her head in protest as she hugged her shamisen.

“What do *you* want? Jeez, I was in such a good mood too, and you had to go ruin it.”

The cat’s breath reeked of alcohol as she hurled her harsh remarks. He didn’t recall doing anything to her that would make her treat him this way, especially since even she was currently in a human form, the same as him. It made him angry. Kusamakura held out the thing the cat dropped, regretting showing her some kindness.

“I don’t know if it’s a spatula or a pick, but here.”

She seemed to have been playing her shamisen earlier with her fingers, but normally one would play with a pick. The metallic thing Kusamakura picked up looked like the picks he saw in books. The cat’s eyes widened at Kusamakura’s words. Those eyes shone a golden color as her vertical pupils widened. Her eyes looked as if she was aiming for her prey, or ready to harass him, so Kusamakura reflexively drew back.

“Oh.....hohohoho.”

The cat doubled over in a high-pitched laughter, covering her mouth with her sleeve. He hadn't said anything funny, so being laughed at like that got on Kusamakura's nerves.

“What?”

“What, I see, you.....hohohoho.”

The cat seemed to understand something, but Kusamakura didn't understand *her* at all. The cat's lips arched as she chuckled.

“I'll give that to you.”

“Huh.....?”

What was he supposed to do with something like that? He had no interest in playing the shamisen, plus he didn't even have one to begin with. Before Kusamakura could tell her he didn't need it, the cat spoke quickly.

“That's not a pick. It's a *mirror*.”

“.....mirror?”

He took one more look at the “mirror” that was small enough to fit in her kimono sleeve without getting in the way. There was a flower pattern embossed on one side which contrasted with the smooth opposite side. The cat told him the surface supposedly had a film of

mercury and tin affixed to it. The moment he tried to touch the surface, she yelled at him to stop.

“Aah, you can’t touch mirrors. It’ll get cloudy. There’s a polisher in the town, but there’s no way *you’d* be able to ask him. If it gets cloudy, you won’t be able to use it, and you’ll have no choice but to throw it away.”

“.....I mean, even if you give it to me...”

“Take it. As my feelings for you.”

Fufu, the cat let out a laugh as she turned back around. She then once again strummed her shamisen as she sang. Not understanding the cat’s behavior, Kusamakura stood there dumbfounded. Cats were unpredictable creatures, but that was completely incomprehensible behavior.

“.....a mirror, huh.”

Nevertheless, his gaze dropped to the “mirror” that was forced on him. Mirrors were a human tool that he had read about in books several times. He didn’t like how the cat’s behavior seemed to have some ulterior motive, but he was excited to have something he had only seen in books. It looked like a metallic sheet, but he wondered how it worked. He held it up in front of him as his curiosity was spurred on. Perhaps because it was a dark night, nothing was reflecting back. Come to think of it, Kusamakura didn’t know what his own face looked like. If he were a youkai that could pop out his eyes, it would have been different, but

he was normally unable to look at himself. Just what sort of face did he have? Even if he didn't look like the heroes from his books.....Kusamakura's heart beat excitedly wondering what he looked like.

However, when the sun rose, and he looked nervously into the mirror under the light of the morning, Kusamakura tilted his head at what was reflected. *Weird*, he thought, tilting his head in the opposite direction. He couldn't tell if what he was holding was a fake or clouded, but when he held it up to the ticket, the smooth mirror surface reflected the grass. Therefore, if it reflected another animal, like a sparrow slipping into the foliage, then that same thing would actually be there in reality. If that was the case, then why was only Kusamakura not being reflected?

Why? Why was that?

It was often written in horror books that ghosts didn't have a physical body. He wasn't dead, but he wondered if he didn't have a reflection because he wasn't human. When he tilted his head in thought, someone suddenly spoke to him from behind.

“What are you doing, Kusamakura?”

The face he saw in the rustling thicket was from the head of the *rokurokubi*, Shunshou. His head at the end of his outstretched neck, circled around him. *Doesn't that make you dizzy*, Kusamakura wondered in amazement, unsure how to answer him. Shunshou fully

appeared in front of Kusamakura who was silent with his head still tilted.

“Oh, is that a mirror?Why do you have something like that?”

“A cat forced it on me yesterday.”

“.....a cat? What, again?”

Kusamakura didn't know what he meant by that. He was avoided by those around him. The only one who would ever talk to him was Shunshou, so it was strange to Kusamakura that a cat would hand over anything to him.

“I don't really understand, but.....I feel like I'm starting to get it somehow.”

“Ooh?”

“Nothing's reflecting. She was making fun of me. That hateful cat.”

Actually, it reflected everything but himself. However, he didn't need to say that much. Kusamakura held out the mirror to Shunshou. He seemed confused as he took the mirror from Kusamakura. He then messed with his bangs some.

“It's reflecting clearly to me. Looks like it was just polished.”

“Don't be stupid.”

He had been looking into it all morning, but nothing was reflecting back. When he frantically looked into the mirror, Shunshou's face was certainly reflected there. He immediately held up the mirror that was given back to him, but as expected nothing was reflected.

".....nothing's reflecting."

"You're too close, Kusamakura. Look from further away."

Since he couldn't see anything, he had certainly brought his face about an inch away from the mirror, thinking he could see better if it were closer. *I see*, finally understanding, he moved his hand away from his face. Once he gradually pulled it away, something odd reflected back.

"You can see now, right?"

Kusamakura shook his head in shock at Shunshou's voice.

"I can't see.....well, something's reflecting, but....."

The reflection in the mirror copied Kusamakura's movements as he shook his head.

"Let me see."

Shunshou's face lined up next to Kusamakura's as he spoke. When their two heads were beside each other, Kusamakura's startled body tensed.

“Aah, it’s definitely reflecting. Look, you were too close, just like I thought.”

You’re a lot denser than I thought, Shunshou laughed. His voice echoed in Kusamakura’s head, he felt faint. It was a shock. He felt as though he couldn’t breathe. Kusamakura hid the mirror in his sleeve, and turned away from Shunshou.

“Kusamakura?”

“Aah.....It’s nothing, I just remembered something I had to do.”

Kusamakura said his goodbyes before leaving that place. His heart ached. It rampaged in his chest. It felt like it would burst right out.

—There was nothing there.

Kusamakura walked at a speed that was almost running. He felt the weight in his sleeve of the mirror that reflected the undeniable truth of his existence.

—My face wasn’t there.....!

His breathing was violently out of control. He tried to steady his breath, but was unable to. Kusamakura covered his mouth as he ran off with no particular destination.

Shunshou next to him in the mirror was an exact reflection. In other words, the image of himself beside Shunshou was also real. Falling

forward onto the pebbles, Kusamakura finally stopped. He gasped for breath as he grabbed the mirror in his sleeve with trembling fingers, and pulled it out once again. A *faceless man* was reflecting back at him. His straight, black hair was tied up, flowing to one side. Since he brushed it every morning with a comb he had found, it was well kept. Kusamakura sighed as he put the hair that had slipped out of place behind his ear. Lips emerged from his smooth skin. When he closed his mouth, he was able to make it disappear. He wasn't aware of it until now, so he was shocked he looked this way. He didn't have a nose, eyebrows or eyes a human would naturally have. Unless his mouth wasn't being suppressed down, it was like it didn't exist. If that was the case, how did he have "vision"? How did he recognize "smells"? He didn't know. If he didn't have those organs, how did they work? Kusamakura put the mirror away in his sleeve, then hesitantly touched his face. The smooth surface of his face had no unevenness at all. His barely there cheeks were completely rounded. He could tell there was nothing at all on his face as he touched all over it with his hands. There was no way he had never touched his face until now. Even so, he never suspected he didn't have a face either.

—*Aah, aah, I see.....*

Unable to stand, Kusamakura fell to his knees. That's why everyone would lower their heads around him. Kusamakura finally understood. Of course a creature without a face was creepy. Even the most grotesque creatures had faces. Unable to connect with humans, he

must have been able to connect to the others—but he couldn't, since he was closer to a human. Why, how would that make him feel any better? He found himself incredibly laughable and pitiful for never finding it odd that Shunshou, who also looked closer to a human, had a lot of friends and he didn't.

—*Aah, aah.....*

How could it be this painful? How could it be this sad?

Kusamakura covered his face with a despair he had never felt before in his entire life. Unseen, Kusamakura cried, feeling like an idiot. He cried in shame at his foolish, ignorant self.

—He was crying, but no tears came out.

Of course. Because he had no eyes. Despair struck Kusamakura for the second time, and he became even more terrified.

“*Aah.....!*”

Tears would definitely melt and wash away his sadness to heal his heart. However, Kusamakura could not do that. *Aah*, he let out a sigh that was almost a shout, but no matter what he did, his sorrow would not pass, completely remaining within his body. His body collapsed and Kusamakura lay on the ground. He was unable to shed a single tear.

Once the sun set, and the area around him was completely dark, the faint sound of a festival band riding on the wind reached his ears. There seemed to be a summer festival being held in the distance, in the direction of the town. Around the same time as the human festival, the beings around him had their night parade. The procession would go down the town's main road singing, dancing and drinking. There were days they slipped in among humans every once in a while, but in this case, most everyone participated. Since Kusamakura had never tried to join them, he didn't know much about it. He thought about how there was going to be a procession somewhere today as he stared blankly at the dark surface of the river. His shoulder was suddenly tapped.

“Boo!”

There was a mask that looked like a fox swinging upside down in front of him.

“What? Oh, it's you, Shunshou.”

He said with a sigh. Shunshou removed his mask and made a disappointed face. He swiftly retracted his outstretched neck then sat down next to Kusamakura. Shunshou must have thought something was wrong with him when he ran away this afternoon. Kusamakura figured he may have actually been a pretty perceptive man.

“You’re not participating in the night parade? Then, do you want to go to the human town? They’re having a festival today, let’s go have some fun.”

Okay? He suggested, but there was no way he could consent. He didn’t feel like having fun, much less be the faceless man who causes a commotion at the festival. When he muttered that to him in a quiet voice, Shunshou assured him it would be all right as he tapped his chest.

“I’ve just come back from scaring someone! Seriously though, those Edo guys sure are used to *youkai*.”

Kusamakura became enraged by the word *youkai*.

“—I don’t want to scare anyone!”

Being yelled at by Kusamakura, Shunshou closed his mouth as his eyes widened. Even Kusamakura was taken aback, but he was unable to honestly apologize, so he put his arms around his knees again while feeling awkward. Shunshou and the others may not have known, but Kusamakura didn’t think he had an unusual appearance at all. He was afraid of scaring people with his frightening form. He didn’t want to scary anyone at all. The only proof he had that he was strange was how humans saw Kusamakura. He had never thought about it before though. Kusamakura stood up, still silent.

“Kusamakura? Hey, where are you—“

To shake off the voice trying to stop him, Kusamakura ran. Halfway through, several sneering laughs coming from the shadows of the grass reached his ears. They may have known that he wasn't aware he was *faceless*. Unable to bear that thought, he yelled at them to shut up, but he just felt empty. Kusamakura ran as fast as he could into the dark night as he muttered, *damn it, damn it*, repeatedly. He reached a pine tree at the top of the mountain and put his hand against its wide trunk. When he tried to catch his slightly elevated breath, a gentle voice came down from above.

“Oh my.”

“You're the guy from Akasaka.....no, Tameike, right? Kusamakura, was it? What's the matter, you're panting.”

When he lifted his face, a man in a human form was sitting on the branch of the pine tree, smiling. Being seen at one of his worst moments, Kusamakura kept quiet and tried to run away from that place. However, that man stopped him with a gentle voice.

“Wait. I'm in a good mood today.”

Fufu, the man let out a laugh before softly jumping down from the branch. His feet hit the ground weightlessly. He smiled. The man—Misura, was the fox who managed Edo. Kusamakura hadn't seen his fox form before, but he heard his true form was as large as an ox, and his tail was split into nine. More than manage, he was more accurately

head of the youkai. He was always settling disputes calmly with death from the top of the mountain with an air of composure. However, he didn't by any means have a violent disposition, during his free time he drank, had fun, and lived his happy-go-lucky life. Kusamakura rarely interacted with others, let alone start fights, so he never had to rely on him for anything good or bad. He had long, thick hair, tied back loosely, and a large fur around his neck that almost consumed his face. He had never seen one before other than in book illustrations, and woodblock prints, but he looked like a kabuki actor. His hair shone silver without relying on the light of the moon which he heard was the same color as his true form's fur. The black irises in his slit eyes were both beautiful and frightening. He narrowed those eyes at Kusamakura who had reflexively taken a step back.

“Not only is today our procession, and the human festival.....I heard an amusing story as well. It truly is a good night.”

“.....it's just one thing after another.”

Unfortunately, this had been the worst day of *his* life. The man in front of him let out a sigh when Kusamakura once again lowered his head with a heavy heart.

“Haa.....you didn't know you didn't have a face until now? Pft, haha.”

Aah, hilarious. Being laughed at by Misura made his cheeks instantly burn. Shunshou must have exposed him. Even though he didn't think

of him as a friend, he felt betrayed. Feeling that way made him realize he trusted him more than he thought. He should have told Misura it was none of his business, and turn around to leave, but Kusamakura was unable to move from that spot, as if his feet had taken root there on the ground. It felt as though something heavy was sinking in his chest, it was suffocating. His lips struggled to move.

“I-I don’t know what Shunshou was talking about.”

“Huh?”

Misura tilted his head to interrupt Kusamakura who was trying to come up with excuses as he played dumb.

“I didn’t hear it from Shunshou. What, you don’t know? I heard it from a cat.”

“A cat?”

Kusamakura was relieved when he heard it was the one who gave him the mirror. He was annoyed he was being made a laughing stock, but at least it wasn’t Shunshou’s doing.

“She told me she was on her way home in a good mood after avenging her friend when you happened to be there, and then she gave you her mirror.”

“.....yeah.”

“She said, if this guy doesn’t know what a mirror is, then he probably doesn’t know what his own face looks like.....fufu. That’s way too hilarious. You really didn’t know you didn’t have a face up until now, you have to be kidding me!”

He heard the laughing voices from the beings that at some point had shown up around them, along with Misura’s chuckling in his pretty voice. He couldn’t see them, but they had probably been listening to their conversation the whole time. Humiliated, Kusamakura clenched his fists. He didn’t have a face. That’s why no matter how hurt, angry or sad he was, no one could tell. After laughing for a while, Misura covered his mouth with his sleeve and narrowed his eyes.

“.....fufu, I haven’t laughed like this in so long. Today is a good day. A refreshing day. You’re so pitiful, so why don’t I grant you a wish?”

Kusamakura tilted his head at Misura’s whim. He wasn’t a god, but he had heard before that he was able to kill and bring things to life at will. There was no way he could grant trivial wishes though. Still, even if he told him to make a wish, he couldn’t think of anything he wanted.

“Aah, but there’s nothing I can do about your face.”

If he couldn’t grant him a face, then there was nothing he especially wished for. However, since saying that was way too pitiful, Kusamakura kept his mouth shut.

“Oh, your expression didn’t change at all. You’re not the least bit cute.”

Misura said with a laugh, oblivious to Kusamakura's innermost thoughts. He heard snickering when someone said, *he doesn't have a face, of course it wouldn't change.*

"I didn't tell you that to pick on you. It's impossible for even someone like me to create something that *wasn't there to begin with.*"

".....whatever. I don't care."

Finally able to move his feet, Kusamakura turned away from Misura, and withdrew.

"I see. Well, if there's ever something you want, come to me. I'll grant your wish any time. Within the scope of my abilities of course."

From the way he chuckled, he had a feeling he was being made fun of. Even so, he was a man that always spoke in that manner to begin with, so he may not have had any ulterior motives. Hating his overly self-conscious feelings, he gave into his shame.

"One day."

Kusamakura replied curtly before running toward his home.

When he returned to the river bank, Shunshou was still there with the fox mask on his head. He was making a pinwheel he must have bought at one of the stalls spin round and round. He lifted his head when he noticed Kusamakura.

“Yo~ You went to the festival too?”

“No.....”

Kusamakura wiped away his sweat and sat down by the river bank without saying a word about running into Misura, or being ridiculed. The pinwheel made noise when he heard a breath start to spin it.

“.....sorry. I didn’t know anything.”

“.....did you hear anything from anyone?”

Shunshou tilted his head vaguely at Kusamakura’s question. The beings around this area loved rumors and making fun of people. Shunshou must have heard that stupid story about him not knowing he didn’t have a face up until today.

“Kusamakura, let’s go to the festival.”

“.....I told you no, didn’t I? You may like scaring people, but I...”

Want to be normal.

He had thought he was no different from a normal human. He swallowed down those foolish words. Shunshou hit his lowered face with something.

“.....!?”

No, it wasn't *hit*. He *covered* Kusamakura's face with the mask he was wearing on his head.

"Shunshou?"

"Now it's okay to walk around the town, right?"

So, let's go.

Shunshou said pulling on Kusamakura's arm so they could dive into the festival. He went holding onto his anxieties, but the result was just as Shunshou said. No one was afraid of Kusamakura. He didn't stand out among the children and adults wearing masks the same as him. No one would run away when he spoke to them. There were stall owners who would make him laugh with jokes. He "shopped" for the first time in his life. No one was frightened when they saw Kusamakura. No one ridiculed him. Other than his face, he was no different from a human. Kusamakura realized as long as he hid his face, he could pass for human.



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He felt uplifted, and was light on his feet without drinking a drop of alcohol. That night was like a dream. However, the night of the festival wouldn't continue for much longer. Leaving the crowd, Kusamakura and Shunshou returned home. As the two of them walked along the path at night, Kusamakura thanked Shunshou. He thanked him for giving him the mask, and taking him out to the town. He also felt guilty for doubting him at one time.

“.....don't mention it, you don't need to thank me.”

“But, I was able to go out among people.”

Wearing a mask may be unnatural any other time aside from a festival. That was fortuitous enough to Kusamakura though. All Shunshou could do was make an ambiguous expression at Kusamakura's thanks.



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Come Toward the Sound of My Hands

Tatsumi Konnou remembered the day he lost his sight clearly. Since he wasn't that young when he lost his sight, and it was a day that changed his life, no matter how much he thought he could try to forget, it wasn't something he *could* forget. Tatsumi's eyesight had always been poor to begin with. He couldn't see much without his glasses, and had severe night blindness ever since he was a child. It was gradual, but his vision that faded day by day made him nothing but terrified he would wake up one morning blind. Not knowing what to do if that happened, he would cry into his pillow every night. He lost his ability to see when he was fourteen years old. Whenever he mentioned his age when it happened, people would tell him, *ooh, so you could see until you were older*. However, it varied for each individual, so according to the people who had the same condition as him, who mostly lost their sight in a few decades, Tatsumi's progression was fast. Even when he could see, his vision was declining rapidly, so glasses and contacts barely worked. He immediately started to use a white cane, learned braille, and how to use text-to-voice software during that time.

It was cloudy that fateful day. Since it was a cloudy, rainy day, he couldn't see that well without the light on even though it was day time, but when he asked his little sister to turn on the light, she answered back, *the weather is really nice today*. It wasn't cloudy that day at all. Without a cloud in the sky, the clear sunlight was radiating into their living room. His little sister's nonchalant words affirmed the anxiety

Tatsumi had been holding on to. Since his mother was more familiar with the progression of Tatsumi's condition more than he was, she realized it right away.

By that afternoon, Tatsumi's eyes no longer saw a thing. His vision was covered in darkness, closing him off from the outside world like the moment a camera shutter closed. Dumbfounded, Tatsumi sat still in his seat in a classroom, unable to move for a while even after class ended. Tatsumi, completely frozen in shock, called out to the math teacher. "Sensei, it appears I've completely lost my eyesight."

He reported it as if he were talking about someone else. When he thought about it now, that male teacher he confessed that serious matter to must have been panicking on the inside as well. Tatsumi appeared calm. But there was no way he wasn't panicking. He was just so dumbfounded that he wasn't even able to react.

His sight was completely closed off, but he could vaguely distinguish light from dark. Even if that was only limited to days of good weather. He thought it was a good thing, but he also resented it because he would have preferred to have given up and not see a thing. It made him hold on to a faint hope that he may have been able to see for just a moment, but nothing burned its images into Tatsumi's retinas ever again.

".....haa."

Sitting on a bench in a park near his work place, Tatsumi let out a heavy sigh as he took a bite of his sandwich. It was a large park in the middle of the city, with trees growing around the grounds. The piercing heat of the sunlight made deep shadows from the trees over the bench, making it rather comfortable. Since he hadn't been with his company for long, Tatsumi had his lunch there every day, except on days with bad weather. His lunch breaks were one of the only times he could relax. He let out another sigh as he chewed on his sandwich.

—Today it's a ham and vegetable sandwich.....since yesterday was strawberries and cream, I didn't really feel like eating lunch, huh.

Nevertheless, he wasn't surprised when a super sweet taste spread through his mouth when he was expecting something savory.

Compared to that, today was a huge win. To Tatsumi who couldn't see, even things like convenient store sandwiches and onigiri were like surprise boxes, or Russian roulette. He was unable to grab a clerk to ask what was inside them during the morning rush, plus he couldn't even be sure who was actually a clerk. That's why he was indifferent when he chose. There were times when he could figure it out by touch, but since not knowing what he would get was more fun, and other customers may not like him feeling around the products, he usually grabbed at random, and took it up to the register.

—I'm glad today was a success.

He carried the sandwich to his mouth that naturally formed a smile. That may not have been something to get so excited over, but he always

thought finding happiness in the little things was a special skill of his. Since he knew grieving over every little thing was pointless, he decided to live at least somewhat optimistically. As he chewed, he heard a group of young boys cutting across the park who smelled of curry. Since the park was right in the middle of an office town, there were a lot of restaurants and food trucks in the area, but Tatsumi's ever sensitive nose picked up on the smell of a school issued lunch. There seemed to be a kindergarten and elementary school nearby, so he would always hear the high-pitched voices of children and smell their lunches.

—But, I can't always figure it out by the smell.....curry is easy to recognize though. Ah, now I kind of feel like eating curry.....

Since he didn't do much of his own cooking, he rarely had opportunities to eat curry. Deciding pre-packaged should be fine, he would have some next time. Tatsumi stuffed the last bite of his sandwich into his mouth. He put the plastic wrapping from the sandwich he had slowly eaten into his bag, spacing out until his lunch break was over. He then stood up holding his electronic white cane. Going back the way he was used to, he returned to his workplace.

Apparently braille was added to this elevator ever since Tatsumi joined the company. Feeling the consideration of the company, he was happy and thankful every time he rode the elevator. He went through the fingerprint check gate that was like a train station ticket gate, and opened the door to his office. They seemed to have installed that check

gate ten years ago. It was just coincidence that it didn't require a card or key, but even that was extremely helpful to Tatsumi.

“.....I'm back.”

However, as soon as he opened the door, his lifted spirits from earlier immediately fell. The only one who reacted to Tatsumi's voice was one of the male supervisors. No other voices responded. He wasn't sure if anyone else was there since he couldn't see. Getting the feeling from the atmosphere no one needed his optimism, Tatsumi consciously hardened his expression. The faint sound of typing on a computer, the creaking of chairs, and the sound of tapping on a cellphone all beat against his eardrums, but Tatsumi pretended not to notice, returned to his seat, and placed the headphones attached to his computer onto his ears. He could hear his text-to-voice software, the voices on his phone, and everything else he needed on those headphones. It also drowned out the outside noise.

After Tatsumi graduated from high school, he was hired at this company. It had been three years since then. He was starting to get used to his work, but there wasn't a single coworker who would exchange words with Tatsumi. It was partly because it was a workplace with mostly women, but that wasn't the only reason. It was a comparatively large call center introduced to him by a former teacher from his school for the blind that would employ him with his disability. No matter how prepared or interested his boss was from talking to his former teacher, hiring a visually impaired employee was naturally

confusing for the both of them when Tatsumi first started. He heard there was a deaf woman in another department, but Tatsumi had never met her. Even his little sister's friends have asked him, *how do you work if you can't see*, but the work he did wasn't actually all that difficult. He currently had text-to-voice software on his computer and the same application on his cell phone. Since Tatsumi had no friends, he didn't need them, but things like sending e-mail, posting on social networks, checking net news, were no problem for him once he got used to them, even if he couldn't see. With all of the tools he could use for the visually impaired, there was actually very little he *couldn't* do. He needed help from others when circulated forms went around, or when documents needed his seal, but that was about it. Even now there wasn't a coworker who wouldn't help him with at least that.

Feeling a tap on his shoulder, Tatsumi removed his headphones.

“—Konnou-san. Have you finished checking the business cards?”

Tatsumi was startled by the harsh voice coming down from above his head.

“Yes.....everything was fine.”

He somehow managed to fake a smile as he replied. The voice belonged to a woman named Yamauchi who had been hired five years before Tatsumi. While she was the one who spoke to Tatsumi the most, her voice always had an obvious tinge of *annoyance* in it.

“Sorry, I—“

“If everything was fine, then report that to me please.

.....Ooh, that’s impossible for you, isn’t it, Konnou-san, so you were waiting for me to talk to you about it, huh. Sorry.”

Losing his chance to apologize, Tatsumi kept quiet. There was an e-mail saying if there were any misprints in the business cards, contact a manager, so Tatsumi checked them. He may have overlooked something important. Since he couldn’t see, he was unable to check them very quickly, but Yamauchi probably went out of her way to come and check them herself.

“If there’s a mistake on the braille parts, we won’t know since we can’t read it. Sorry for always checking in when you’re busy.”

He wasn’t sure if she meant any ill will or not, but her words were certainly full of venom, and made him feel like shrinking back. The business cards they had made for Tatsumi included braille. Tatsumi wouldn’t have many opportunities to use them, or receive them since the other employee’s business cards didn’t have braille. Actually, it would be nice if the other business cards had braille too. He considered that, but since it wasn’t the right mood to ask about it, Tatsumi once again lowered his head.

“Um.....thank you.”

“Don’t mention it~ Well, if there are no problems, they’re good to go then?”

Haa, she let out a deliberate sigh, making Tatsumi miss another chance to respond. His stomach instantly started to hurt. As soon as he heard

Yamauchi's footsteps grow distant, the sharp sound of her clicking her tongue pierced his eardrums. His hearing had become heightened ever since he lost his sight, so he would often pick up unnecessary things like that. Tatsumi turned to his desk with a bitter smile, and put on his headphones. Yamauchi always had a prickly attitude, or maybe it was because she didn't like to associate with Tatsumi. Even so, she was the one who always came to Tatsumi for whatever business. She may have been forced to.

—I'd probably be punished for saying this, but.....she should just switch with someone else then.

Since it was Yamauchi, the possibility of her switching with someone else to be his messenger if she could wasn't zero. He was thankful for all the things she did for him. There was no mistake about that, but Tatsumi didn't like Yamauchi. It wasn't limited to Yamauchi though, the reason his coworkers assisted him wasn't just out of kindness. Yamauchi told him about half a year after he was hired that it was because if he made a mistake on a form, it wasn't Tatsumi, who had the handicap of being blind, who received the blame, it was all of his coworkers who didn't say anything to their blind companion. Even if Tatsumi needed help, he didn't want to trouble anyone. However, if he really was the blame for troubling his coworkers, he would have no choice but to refuse their help. He was the one who didn't check his work properly. Coming to terms with this attitude of his company, he limited himself to accepting how his coworkers felt about him, and tried not to receive any favors. Whenever one of his coworkers spoke to

him, Tatsumi could feel the mood was heavy as if it was immensely troublesome for them. He didn't have much contact with anyone other than Yamauchi, but the fact that she was the only one who spoke to him must have meant it was a pain for his other coworkers to associate with him. Even if he couldn't see, he could at least sense that sort of atmosphere. He didn't know if anyone ever came to talk to him because they wanted to or not. There are people who see a handicapped person in front of them who won't help them more than they need to, and those who are eager to help, but there are also people who aren't sure if they should help or not, but since it's a pain, they won't get involved with a handicapped person. His coworkers may have been the latter.

—I guess it can't be helped. Their troubles and concerns have certainly increased because of me. Besides, I'm the one at fault for making mistakes in the first place.....

It wasn't his fault because he was blind. It was just Tatsumi's *own* fault. *I won't be a burden any more than necessary*, he thought.

Even so, every time he received help from someone—every time he forced his burden on others, he definitely wanted to apologize. His coworkers certainly didn't know that since he was afraid he would be fired if he kept apologizing, he thanked them instead. That fact resulted in his awkward manner of speaking, and his clumsiness.

The moment he held the onigiri he bought for the day, something felt kind of strange. There seemed to be some large ingredient buried into

one side, but he couldn't make out what it was by touch. He sat down on the bench in the park as usual, took off the wrapper, and tried smelling it. It had a somewhat raw smell, but he couldn't tell what it was at all. He took a large bite out of it.

—*Mn! It's an egg! A boiled egg!*

It was an onigiri that had a boiled egg with the bittersweet taste of shoyu buried in it. *So they even have ones like this*, Tatsumi thought as he chewed. He was impressed by the abundance of variation the convenient store had of onigiri. When he thought about it, there were often boiled eggs included in his bento when he lived with his family. Fried eggs may have been more of a standard side for bento, but since his little sister hated fried eggs, and would only eat boiled eggs for some reason, the bento made by their mother usually included boiled eggs. She would make several variations of boiled eggs like salty ones, ones that tasted like pickled ginger.....and ones like the one stuffed in his mouth. He stayed in a dormitory for the blind during high school, so it had been five years since he had eaten a bento from his mother.

—*Hmmm.....how nostalgic.*

He reached for his second onigiri as he chewed.

“.....!”

At that moment, a gust of wind blew by. It was a wind so strong it almost took off with the convenient store bag Tatsumi was holding. He thought he heard a quiet voice behind him say, *ah!* The sound of the wind shook his ear drums. There was also the sound of something

lightweight falling to the ground as if the wind had blown away some trash.

—.....that really startled me. Must have been the wind from the buildings. There seem to be a lot of high-rises in this area, so the wind is strong around here.....

The dirt from the park must have been fanned up, he could smell the faint scent of a cloud of earth. Once he regained his composure, he put his hand into the bag again, but he suddenly felt a knock on the back of the bench. It was being knocked on like a door. At first he thought it was his imagination, so he continued to eat, but when they knocked again, he started to think someone was trying to get his attention. However, Tatsumi couldn't think of anyone he knew that would go out of their way to speak to him.

“Yes?”

When he answered still facing forward, the person behind him began to mutter.

“.....could you grab that mask over there for me?”

It was the deep, calm voice of a man. His clear voice still sounded young. He must have been in his mid-twenties to early thirties. The man seemed to be talking to him from behind his back, so even though he was close, he sounded far.

“Mask?”

Not sure what he meant by that, he didn't know what to do.

“Over there.”

The man added as if he were getting impatient.

“It fell over there. A fox mask.....that gust of wind from earlier blew it away.”

“A fox mask.....ooh, like a festival one?”

He finally understood what he meant, but he didn't know where *over there* was.

“Over there. It's over there. Hurry—“

“Sorry.”

When he turned around, he could hear the man gasp quietly. He must have felt uncomfortable seeing Tatsumi's open eyes that saw nothing. Ever since he lost his sight, his other senses had heightened, so Tatsumi could clearly sense his presence from his faint breathing. Tatsumi smiled wryly at the man who didn't utter a word.

“.....sorry, I'm blind.”

It was a little painful for him to have to report that. Mostly because it made other people feel awkward, as if they had touched on something taboo.

“What should I do...”

That was all the person in front of him at the moment replied to Tatsumi's confession. That was a reaction a little different from the usual.

Damn.

He heard his quiet mutter.

—*Huh?*

He didn't seem to feel apologetic for making Tatsumi tell him he was blind, nor for asking a blind person for a favor. He just seemed to be troubled that he wouldn't pick up his mask for him. He thought he may be blind too, but knew that wasn't the case from what he had said earlier.

—.....*I don't really get it, but I guess he can't grab it himself for some reason.*

Since the park was so big, he wasn't limited to asking the person closest to him for help. Normally people would say, *he's blind, so can someone else help me*, but from the way the man behind him asked him to pick it up for him in a quiet voice, he must not have wanted to draw much attention to himself. He seemed troubled, so Tatsumi grabbed the electronic white cane leaning next to him, and stood up.

“Um, please wait a moment.”

“Huh? But, you can't see.....”

“It'll be all right. Probably.”

Tatsumi started to walk, using the tip of his cane to search around. Since it was a mask, he could possibly break it if he were to walk while hitting it against his path like he usually did, so he searched for it while scraping the tip against the ground. The tip of the electronic white cane Tatsumi held let him know about any obstacles in the way through vibrations in the handle. Even though he had never tried it before, it

was probably possible to use that function to find things too. He searched around slowly, once he held it out towards a certain area the handle vibrated a little. Wondering if that was it, he knelt down and searched around his feet. He patted his hands in all directions until his fingertips touched something lightweight.

“.....here it is. It must be this.”

When he picked it up and checked its shape, he could tell it was shaped something like a fox in the palm of his hands. He could confirm it when he searched around for the small holes around the eye area. He said it was a mask, so he had imagined one made of plastic like the ones they sell at festivals, but it seemed to be made of papier-mâché. Since the strings attached to it were different lengths, the little weight the mask had felt unbalanced. He returned to the bench with the mask and held it out behind the backrest.

“Here you go.”

The man immediately took the mask from him. He heard him let out a sigh of relief. Tatsumi was also relieved he could properly hand over what he was looking for.

“.....sorry. I owe you my gratitude.” *You're welcome*, Tatsumi replied with a smile to the man's unusually humble way of speaking. Realizing that he was usually the one receiving help from others, especially once he started living alone, and was employed, it really had been a long time since someone had thanked him for anything.



Feeling somewhat embarrassed for various reasons, Tatsumi sat back down on the bench in order to turn away from the man. He reached for his second onigiri. It was a triangular onigiri wrapped in nori with tuna and mayonnaise inside. He started to eat his meal at his own pace, but the presence of the man behind Tatsumi didn't vanish. After a while, he spoke.

“You can't see at all?”

Tatsumi swallowed down his onigiri then nodded.

“My eyes were bad a long time ago, but I completely lost my sight when I was fourteen.”

That's why he had a general understanding of color, and knew things like the faces of celebrities and what not. When he answered him in that manner, the man continued his words.

“They won't heal? Ever?”

—He's a pretty blunt person, isn't he...

It was better than treating him delicately, but there were very few people who ever questioned him directly like this.

A little lost, Tatsumi slowly shook his head.

“.....it's not like they can't be healed. There's just no guarantee.”

“What do you mean?”

“There seems to be a surgery that may allow me to see again, but it's not a surgery that can be done in Japan, and since it's extraordinarily expensive, it's just not realistic at all for a commoner like me.”

A few years after he lost his sight, his mother picked up that story from the internet, and consulted their family physician at the time about it. His answer was the same as he just explained. There was no way the Konnou family supported on a salary man's pay could afford it, and they needed the courage to fundraise. The possibility wasn't zero. But the success rate wasn't very high. The surgery cost tens of millions of yen whether it was a success or failure—there was no way he could ask his parents to dish out that sort of money, and it was difficult for his parents to confidently tell him to leave it to them. No matter how much he worked and saved money, he would never have enough. It was natural to give up.

“I've accepted being blind. For now.”

“.....so you can't see anything now? Nothing at all?”

Being asked such direct questions shocked Tatsumi thoroughly. His questions from earlier were the same, but he had never experienced such frank questions as these from a sighted person before. More than shocking or upsetting, it was rather refreshing, and kind of funny.

—.....*how can I put it, he seems like such an innocent person.*

“What?”

The man asked confused when he suddenly laughed.

“Never mind. It's nothing. I can't see anything at all right now. But I can tell the difference between light and dark. That's why I can kind of tell when it's morning, or when the sun is setting, but that's about it.”

“Hmmm.”

“You’re waving your hand in front of my eyes, aren’t you?”

He could tell from the faint flickering before his eyes, the feel of wind touching his skin, and the sound.

“Ooh.....”

The man’s voice that was unusually impressed and somewhat surprised made him laugh again.